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We Race With Death for Cuba Captives

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WASHINGTON.

With just the 1,113 Bay of Pigs veterans waiting away in Cuban prisons may be home for Christmas.

President Kennedy is hopeful that this can be arranged. He is determined that sooner or later the men will be freed. And he is aware that because of the bitter privations they are stoically enduring, many of them will not live much beyond Christmas if they remain in prison.

Relatives of the men (20,000 of their kin are among the 160,000 Cuban refugees living in the Miami area) have begun a new campaign to seek their release. Letters and telegrams are arriving in Washington urging a new effort. They all make the same point: time is short.

Very little is blocking the release. The 1,113 captives, ironically, were within a few days of freedom when the Cuba crisis erupted with President Kennedy's disclosure Oct. 22 that Soviet offensive weapons were in Cuba.

In the tense peace-or-war days that followed, no progress was possible. But the crisis is easing now. The Russians have removed 42 offensive missiles spotted on the island. And last Friday American officials reported that crates contained IL-28 bombers have been moving toward Cuban ports, apparently for shipment back to Russia.

President Kennedy must move gingerly on the prisoners issue. Officially, the United States has never acknowledged a hand in the ill-fated invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs by exiles in April, 1961. For that reason, he can have no official part of any prisoner negotiation.

But privately the President feels a moral obligation to save them and is determined to do it as soon as the time is ripe. From a humanitarian standpoint, in the view of Cuban

exiles and others who closely follow the case, that time has come.

What impresses American officials is that, despite the rigors of prison life, not one of the 1,113 men has defected. Photographs of the few who have been freed, when friends and relatives paid their fines, looked as if they had been at Dachau or Buchenwald, the infamous Nazi concentration camps of World War II. The men had lost 40 to 60 pounds. Despite starvation and maltreatment, all have resisted the blandishments of instant freedom, food and medicine offered if they would but join the Castro regime.

To men such as this—a cross-section of humanity including Catholics, Protestants and Jews, Negroes and whites, rich and poor—the United States government feels it has a moral responsibility. It feels this acutely at this time, when the Cuba crisis is fading and Christmas time approaches, with its tradition of political amnesty and universal humanitarianism.

The situation as it now stands is this:

James B. Donovan, New York lawyer and Democrat who ran unsuccessfully against Sen. Jacob Javits, R., N. Y., last month, represented the prisoners' families in negotiations with Cuban Premier Fidel Castro. Mr. Donovan had arranged with Russia for the swap of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers for Soviet master-spy Rudolf Abel. Apparently he had repeated his success for the Cubans.

The arrangement was similar. No "deal" was involved. Just as the freeing of Mr. Powers and Col. Abel happily "coincided," the 1,113 Cuban prisoners were to come home coincident with the arrival of privately supplied drugs, medicine and baby food for the Cuban people.

This arrangement had the virtue of no direct connection between the American and Cuban governments. It

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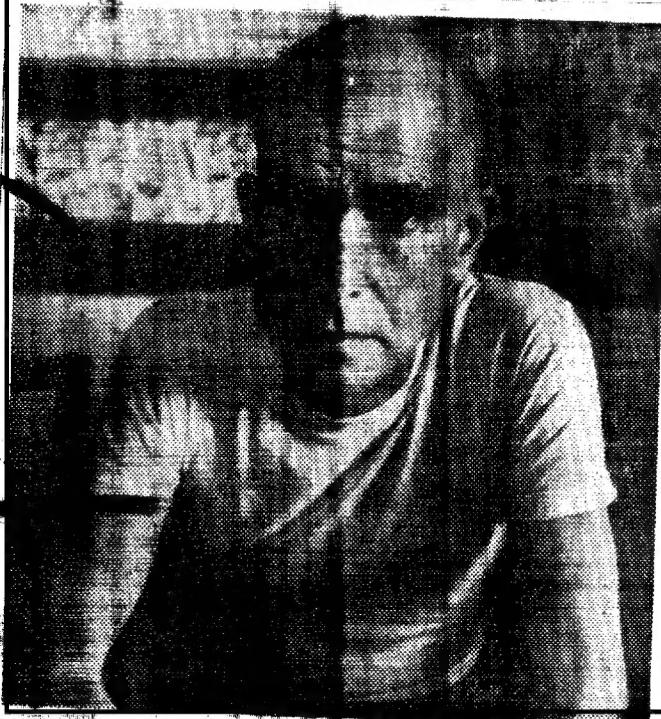
was strictly a people-to-people thing. Sponsored on the American side were various drug companies and baby food manufacturers who donated goods and individuals, who put up money. The beneficiaries would not be the Castro regime, which the United States government continues to oppose, but the hungry babies, the sick and the elderly among the Cuban populace, for whom there is sympathy and good will.

The agreement called for delivery of drugs, medicine and baby food valued at \$62 million, if purchased in Havana. Figured at wholesale and discount prices in this country, it would come to something like \$17 million.

All of it does not have to be delivered before the prisoners are freed. As soon as a down payment of, say, 20 per cent, arrives, Premier Castro is expected to unlock the prison gates. Presumably, Mr. Donovan would fly to Cuba and with transportation provided by airlines in the United States, escort the men back to a reunion with their families, hopefully by Christmas.

Mr. Donovan has been receiving powerful support, although the government officially is keeping hands off. It is no secret that, if it becomes urgent, the government will provide whatever funds cannot be privately raised. Princess Stanislas Radziwill, sister of the President's wife, is serving on an impressive committee of 52 prominent persons seeking to raise the money needed for the prisoners' freedom.

One of the things bothering the Kennedy administration is that critics may object to doing anything which would help the Castro regime. But the President apparently has decided that the obligation to free the men cannot be avoided.



Herald Tribune photo by MORRIS WARMAN
MEMO FROM CASTRO on the Bay of Pigs prisoners:
the haggard face of Fabio Freyre, ransomed by his
family 15 months after the abortive invasion. The cost:
\$100,000, the 65 pounds he lost in prison, and the
price written in suffering on his gaunt features.